

Coronavirus Pedagogy in the Zoomscape: Pinhole Intimacy Culture Meets Conscientization

by Marcus Breen | Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic emptied universities, colleges, and schools across the United States in March 2020, forcing instructors into an unavoidable culture in which a networked commercial technology mediated teaching and learning. In the tradition of critical pedagogy, this article argues that students and instructors alike engaged through the artificial lenses and screens of Zoom. The “pinhole intimacy” of the Zoomscape is assessed using conscientization, the concept offered by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, to describe most pedagogy as an oppressive apparatus that can be overcome with direct engagement between students and instructors. In such an opticentric context, the Zoomosphere’s intimacy is used to explore how the emancipation proposed by conscientization might be applied to the culture of pedagogy in a college with a diverse student population, including pedagogical interventions to address the challenges associated with teaching Division I athletes. The context of a large communication department at Boston College provides the empirical foundation for the exploration of coronavirus pedagogy.

KEYWORDS pedagogy, COVID-19, Zoom, US college athletics, Paulo Freire, conscientization, intimacy, opticentric

Pinhole Intimacy through Opticentricity

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shut-down of schools, colleges, and universities across the United States, forcing the emergence of coronavirus pedagogy on the teaching community. As well as enforcing a style of online teaching for which nobody—instructors and students—was prepared, coronavirus pedagogy became the cultural condition with which millions of people engaged in education had to live. As a new type of pedagogy it combined the experience of classroom teaching and learning, two categories that generalize the uncertain environment that is a commonplace site for discourse and debate about education. The onset of the pandemic meant that teaching engaged undergraduate students, described demographically as “Generation Z” or GenZs, that is young people born after 1996, and the first generation “growing up in an ‘always on’ technological environment.”¹ These undergraduates learned in a context defined by mediation, where Zoom, a corporate video conferencing tool, technologically overdetermined the pandemic’s unprecedented educational relations. As such, this mediated teaching and learning context was more novel for teachers than the GenZs,

forcing educators to reckon with questions about the characteristics of this unprecedented phenomenon, *p*, in the context of the pandemic, prompting questions about how to teach this thing called coronavirus pedagogy. Not only did COVID-19 provoke in the self-conscious cultural worker—in this case the teacher—questions about how we taught, inevitably, the question was and will continue to be one about context: what now is the culture of teaching?

This question emerged given the decentering impact of the pandemic's conditions. Constitutive of such decentering was the emergence of the conceits about the teaching and learning environment for US undergraduate education before the pandemic. Described in pessimistic, even apocalyptic terms by Henry Giroux as a "formative culture" in which the public sphere has been transformed by the economic and financialization imperatives of the market with such intensity that, "The process of depoliticization is amplified through the ongoing privatization and commercialization of formerly public spaces, which then provide no support for citizen-based struggles and the expressive capacities required for public exchange"² Such a critique of teaching *before* the pandemic can be applied to the educational relations that described teaching and learning during the event, as coronavirus pedagogy forced a style of online teaching that generated a novel critical cultural sensibility. It upended established classroom interactions with networked technology in the institutions that hosted it—public and private alike—generating contradictions that provoked new questions. It provided something of a response to Giroux's pre-pandemic question about the impact of new media on education:

The central question should be how do we imagine the new media and its underlying communication systems as contributing to a distinctly different public sphere that offers the promise of recasting modes of agency and politics outside of the neoliberal ideology and disciplinary apparatus that now dominate contemporary culture?³

In answering his own question Giroux suggested that social media and related interactive platforms must reconfigure "the narrow framing mechanisms of casino capitalism, militarism, and religious fundamentalism," to generate a new culture of civic engagement.⁴ Pandemics like COVID-19 took this kind of criticism, grounded on a shakily conceived notion of civic engagement through new media (worthy and necessary as it was), and wrestled it into a different formative culture. In fact, Giroux's important yet foreboding analysis, highlighted a contradictory pandemic context in which hopefulness for survival from disease took place within the intensified corporate structures of networked technology.

In this context, as if by technological magic, the routines of the classroom were transformed, becoming spaces where "pinhole intimacy" replaced the constrained yet open classroom spaces of pedagogical tradition.⁵ Changing how students and instructors saw each other through Zoom's pinhole amplification was (and often remains) inescapable. Suddenly, without the theoretical preparation that embodies the critical orientation of cultural studies and academic life, digital technology released everyone into the opticentric firmament of teaching and learning. Peering through the pinhole at each other, opticentricity first decentered previous systems, methods, and theories of education, then

it amplified the central image in the video screen frame, while around the penumbra a dull cloud of uncertainty hid the broader landscape. In this refined yet ambiguous online environment, classes and courses were subjected to the optiocentric culture of teaching and learning that is coronavirus pedagogy. And as a result of looking through the contextual pinhole of Zoom, questions were prompted about who exactly were the individual students looking at me from their screens. Furthermore, what did I know about the institution of higher learning in which I worked that made such optiocentricity possible?

In the first instance, optiocentricity amplified the fact that like most university-level workers, I am a professor without professional teacher training who engages in pedagogical mimicry. That is to say, in keeping with most of my colleagues everywhere, I follow examples set by those whose style I have observed and reproduced, first from my childhood in a Baptist family where rhetorical style was learned from Billy Graham, Martin Luther King Junior, and much less Malcolm X (all Baptists), my undergraduate days, and more recently from colleagues. Matching this professorial unpreparedness to the condition of the coronavirus pedagogy prompted this inquiry but took me further given my appreciation for Giroux's regular critiques of US higher education, along with my long-standing research interest in the relationship between digital technology, culture, political economy, and left praxis. My response was informed by what Derek Ford called a pedagogy that "bridges the gap between what is and what can be" (and an extension of the public policy mantra "what ought to be?").⁶ This gap was informed by a passing familiarity with concepts drawn from Paulo Freire's 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his 1970 article "Cultural Action and Conscientization," reproduced in the book with the telling title *The Politics of Education*. By 2021, the centenary of Freire's birth, coronavirus pedagogy's enforced style of online teaching had transformed academic labor, leaving little space beyond the pinhole, suggesting that this was a new type of oppression for everyone using Zoom.⁷ In other words, it was, to reference Giles Deleuze, an "enclosure," in which "a generalized crisis" amplified the impact of technology, where "molds, distinct castings," generated a reaction, that is documented in what follows: an insistence on knowing more about what was revealed by the culture of Zoom, closing the gap between the insistent, imperfect digital present and its utopian potential.⁸

From Oppression to Conscientization to Coronavirus Pedagogy

Thanks to Zoom, coronavirus pedagogy provoked a refreshed version of Paulo Freire's conscientization, one grounded in a recognition that

Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves. Their reflectiveness results not just in a vague and uncommitted awareness, but in the exercise of a profoundly transforming action upon the determining reality. Consciousness of and action upon reality are, therefore, inseparable constituents of the transforming act by which men become beings of relation.⁹

The conscientization theory applies to the oppressed, in that their quest for freedom is expressed in education through the process of reflexivity, one that brings consciousness and action together. No longer is it possible to participate in pedagogy as if one is outside the mold, the dominating structure of capitalism. Technology oppresses everyone. For Deleuze, this is the "society of control," in which nothing is ever finished.¹⁰ Through critical engagement, writes Freire, more optimistically than Deleuze, reflexivity about oneself and the world emerges, making it possible to recognize the way one's humanity has been captured, to acknowledge that culture is the result of "structural relations between the dominated and the dominators" and respond by seeking to be free through praxis, which is a commitment to humanize the world through the transformation that results from praxis.¹¹ Freire makes this analysis against "the culture of silence," which he describes as the conditions of living in the Third World, where the metropolis, insisting on dependency, makes it impossible to be heard. "The dependent society is by definition a silent society," he wrote.¹² Ultimately, unless there is reflection that emerges from critical consciousness, there is no historical shift to understanding the conditions under which one lives, rendering the continuation of silence as inaction.¹³

Within this aspiration for praxis, Freire's model of conscientization has contemporary relevance to coronavirus pedagogy because the pandemic demanded a response. "Critical consciousness is brought about not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis—through the authentic union of action and reflection."¹⁴ Under these conditions the oppressed and the oppressor are joined around the poles of contradiction "in their struggle for liberation."¹⁵ Using technology, they move beyond technology's "mythical deviations"—"a species of new divinity . . . a cult of worship"—recognizing that, "Critically viewed, technology is nothing more nor less than a natural phase of the creative process which engaged man from the moment he forged his first tool and began to transform the world for its humanization."¹⁶ As conscientization manifests itself as "reflective action," technology, in the form of Zoom in coronavirus pedagogy, pushed the oppressor and the oppressed together into the contradictory space of the opticentric pinhole.

The unity of the oppressor with the oppressed is reinforced by the assertion Freire makes about the dialogue between them. Freire's demand, in keeping with the Marxist desire to overthrow the forces of oppression, is for leaders to engage in structural transformation through reflection and action, where to be "truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others."¹⁷ Experiencing coronavirus pedagogy for many teachers and students involved the determining force of Zoom's universal oppression through the negative force of digital technologies. Headlines in April 2020, like "Why Zoom is Terrible," to more recent negative readings about "Zoom fatigue," albeit with options for moving into fresh social relations due to what has been learned, were typical of the belief that Zoom denigrated dialogue and the opportunity for shared reflection for which Freire argued.¹⁸ Freire's approach avoids this pessimistic reading by "leaders" or Professors, by bringing the oppressor together with the oppressed within a multidimensionality that avoids internalizing the oppression of students as individuals, by seeking a collective praxis of "equality of treatment access, justice."¹⁹ The culture of coronavirus pedagogy brought together novel intersecting disciplinary concerns, opening up critical new knowledge. It is within this field that conscientization is generative of questions about how teaching and learning was constituted in the new formative

culture. Inevitably, the anterior question was and continues to be: in what ways did the culture of teaching change as my own and every student's subjectivity came into relief through the opticentric pinhole of Zoom?

The question emerged from the application of conscientization to new fields of human experience due to the closure of educational institutions during the pandemic and the opening of the pinhole's opticentricity. The new terrain is one where critical evaluation of the oppressed describes both student and teacher within a capitalism that requires the Marxist edge Freire offered. Superficially, students and faculty were required to suddenly leave campus under emergency conditions, to be mediated not under conditions of their own choosing, some in self-serving self-interest "praising synchronous tools like Zoom as professional life saviors."²⁰ The pandemic closure mobilized uncompromising criticism of university education, in the style of Henry Giroux. For example,

One of the more insidious aspects of the university system (always linked to P-12 schools, banks, prisons, other corporations, etc.) is how it obscures its violent sorting of persons into radically uneven life chances while modulating effects of deservingness and safety. The affective politics of humanism means that no classroom discussion can ever be separated from larger historical-political forces of colonization, racialization, heteropatriarchy, and extractive capitalism. The university functions for many of us, individually and collectively, as a site of cruel optimism: if we could just get the jobs, the promotions, the postdocs, the degrees, the acceptance letters, the university might be livable.²¹

Critically, Zoom's pinhole intimacy reconstructed such critiques, accentuating human relations along the lines of critical digital pedagogy, setting conditions for a reclamation of "the critical aims of education, its questioning and reflection, its imperative towards justice and equity, and its persistent need to read the world within which it takes place, whether that's a classroom, a living room, a playground, or a digital device."²² Viewing students and faculty as oppressed within this critical frame suggests that Freire's conscientization is a theory by which to evaluate the culture of who and what we were when we sat in front of our computers. Such reflection repositions subjects whose learning spaces were determined by the pandemic, actively creating a conjuncture where the prevailing conditions of capitalism merged with technology and the institutions in which Zoom was used.²³ At an empirical level, a description of what I saw and experienced was required drawing on the framework offered by Freire that in turn, provoked and nourished the tradition of critical pedagogy in its articulation with cultural studies. This radical position begins with a description that identifies this pandemic as a historical period in which technology mediated social relations as educational relations, even as "the aspirations of the oppressed are at once given some acknowledgment and at the same time limited and thwarted," as Raymond Williams noted.²⁴ Such are the contradictions of oppression within a persistently unfolding praxis.

Technology and Oppression—Zoom “Happiness?”

As COVID-19 officially killed hundreds of thousands of Americans, it might have been wise to admit that this is no country for old theorists, and definitely not a country for old men, who, if they were 85 years or older in the US died at a higher rate than anyone else, except non-Hispanic Black or African American (Black) and non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) persons.²⁵ Perhaps it was unwise to recall that James Carey noted in *Communication as Culture*, well before the internet was privatized in the mid-1990s, that communication advances were “rarely seen . . . as opportunities to expand people’s power to learn and to exchange ideas and experience.”²⁶ Thankfully, critical scholarship has shifted since Carey, offering optimistic interventions through technology. Nevertheless, everyone engaged in the pedagogical enterprise was thrown into the privately owned Zoom space, reconstructing users within the additional private spaces of their homes, dormitory rooms, and bedrooms, offering a philosophical mechanism for recognizing “the importance of dialogue as the basis for critical consciousness.”²⁷ In the new educational relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, Zoom foregrounded a formative culture for collective interactions, as the previous forms of classroom interaction were ruptured. Given conscientization, it was a formative cultural context that stressed new conditions and opportunities for “critical awareness, the understanding of self, reality, and its intersection with just action.”²⁸

These opportunities further elaborated on the politics of educational work, as Freire suggested, removing teaching from some category of benign employment activity, into a place in which “love” was embodied in cooperative learning, becoming a site for the emergence of new ways of engaging with knowledge.²⁹ As such, it was political, that is “to build polis, to generate community, to exercise power in a solidary, egalitarian, friendly, cooperative, attentive, sensitive, democratic way.”³⁰ With mounting numbers of fatalities, was it possible to conceive of the pinhole as an access point for a coronavirus pedagogy that might meet such ambitions?

For critical humanities’ professors, coronavirus pedagogy was a new way of making sense of an opportunity to explore a fuller measure of education and in so doing recognize what John Dewey noted in *Democracy and Education*, that, “in certain fundamental respects the same predicaments of life recur from time to time with only such changes as are due to change of social context...”³¹ For its part, coronavirus pedagogy offered more than a predicament, it was a rupture from the business as usual of the contemporary university, presenting new possibilities for working through and changing educational philosophy in its relationship with culture.³² And yet, as thousands upon thousands of Americans died from COVID-19, Zoom offered its contradictory “other,” a context dominated by the reinforcement of a narrowing corporate model, concentrated through the lens of a commercial platform.

This contradictory context is summarized by Shaked Spier, who explained that

The platforms are designed only to promote neoliberal agendas of deregulation, antiunionism, and capital (that is, money and data) accumulation but also to deploy a rhetoric that aims directly at disguising these agendas behind concepts such as sharing, community, freedom and flexibility.³³

Beginning with the mediated pedagogy of Zoom, the lens was commercially determinative, offering continuing educational engagement, even as campuses closed. As the Zoom corporation noted in its 2020 US Securities Exchange Commission filing, “We provide a video-first communications platform that delivers happiness and fundamentally changes how people interact”:

We have a unique model that combines viral enthusiasm for our platform with a multipronged go-to-market strategy for optimal efficiency. Viral enthusiasm begins with our users as they experience our platform—it just works. This enthusiasm continues as meeting participants become paid hosts and as businesses of all sizes become our customers. Our sales efforts funnel this viral demand into routes-to-market that are optimized for each customer opportunity, which can include our direct sales force, online channel, resellers, and strategic partners.³⁴

Designed for “happiness” not education, Zoom became the mediating tool of choice for institutions. The changed circumstances of undergraduate teaching through pinhole intimacy, prompted questions that channeled a mongrel mixture of cultural studies with political economy that I had not previously asked:

- Who are the students I teach?
- What are the conditions in the institution in which they learn and I teach?
- How do these students approach learning?
- What does the formative culture of Coronavirus pedagogy mean?
- In the spirit of critical research, is there a way to focus on the changed context of this new environment, to establish more effective ways of positioning emancipatory pedagogy?
- Can I apply Freire's concepts to this case study of the Coronavirus pedagogy?

Understanding the changing context of US higher education due to COVID-19 is a task that begins with describing the territory in which the culture of teaching is foundational, for myself, the students, and our institution. Seeing that changing context as one in which oppression finds new or reinforced forms was part of the task in what amounts to a case study in applied research about conscientization.

The Zoomscape in a Division I University: Acknowledging Cultural Formations

In the Communication Department in which I teach, with up to 800 majors in a regular semester, the context was typically complicated before the emergency transformation wrought by the pandemic. Then, in the context of coronavirus pedagogy, the existing contexts were multiplied, then amplified, reinventing for the classroom the “scalar dynamic,” the contradictory connective conditions that Arun Appadurai identified at the start of the internet era in 1990, in “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” Appadurai finessed the emergence of ethnoscapas, mediascapas, financescapas, technoscapas and ideoscapas with a nuanced dialectics, noting the variations in the emerging cultural commonality of the networked landscape. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, Appadurai’s global imperatives embodied in ‘scapes coalesced through the Zoomscape’s pinhole opticentricity, with a flux of contradictory concerns. The cultural economy was generalized in Zoom, even though the specifics of each Zoom user was magnified in their relationship to their ethnicity, ideology, location, technology, and so on. Within the dialectic of the Zoomscape’s forces, an appreciation emerged for the diversity of students I teach, an appreciation that was given meaning by Freire’s concept of conscientization, constituted as expressions of solidarity in a survivalist mode.

The coronavirus shutdown reinforced education’s digital turn at the global scalar dynamic, even while being curiously intimate, magnifying the images of students and instructors on the screen. As each participant was identified through the pinhole of opticentricity, the surprising flawlessness of the representations, the imagery of me and my students, like millions around the world, offered a continuation of teaching obligations in a new milieu, one characterized by the mediated intersection of critical humanities, cultural studies, and diverse student needs and capabilities within the unwelcome health and safety pressures of the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, it was a universalized type of oppression, which is where Freire’s concepts are relevant, as the limitations of teaching were multiplied by Zoom, all of which required a response for which no one was prepared. Certainly it was “intimacy without proximity” as Fan Yang suggested, where such intimacy was mediated by the Zoom platform within the intensified urgency of the pandemic.³⁵ Generation Z students and their teachers were further apart while being drawn closer together in an environment more familiar to social media than the open spaces of classrooms.

My experiences were similar to thousands of other teachers, yet unique, due to the institutional determinants, constraints, and policies in place at Boston College (BC), the four-year Jesuit university where I teach. Through the pinhole, the amplification of each student provoked me to explore who they were, how they adapted to the classroom of the Zoomscape, what it means to be a Division I college athlete in the northeast United States, and the cultural shifts that accompanied being off campus yet in class. Such an inquiry is critical because with the pandemic campus shutdown, no detailed conversation, critique, or training was included for faculty to help close the gap between what is and what can be. The opticentric amplification of everyone in the Zoomscape made it evident that we were oppressed at all levels by the technology in the institutions that unquestioningly required

everyone to use it, adding a layer of new work obligations to pedagogy within the logistics of reorganizing classes. All of which heightened my critical awareness of my ignorance about the people on my screen and the institutional setting of the Zoomscape.

Inevitably, the context was messy. Or, as a student wrote in a reflection for the end of semester examination in the spring Communication Ethics course I taught, paraphrasing one of the class readings by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “there is a need to mix the accustomed analytical purity of philosophy with the moral messiness of everyday situations.”³⁶ Freire’s concept of conscientization pushes critical philosophy beyond the culture of chaos into a dimension that is attuned to the need to take an ethical course of action in dialogue—to comprehend the knowledge on the screen as well as the conditions that produced it and the implications for the pursuit of justice resulting from those interactions.

For example, almost no one was prepared for having students seeing them at home. In my case, just as I could see them more fully as mediated and magnified individuals, so could they see me. When they spoke on Zoom they could be selected by me to fill the screen, in pixilated detail. As a counterpoint I wondered about what could be observed in my home office, the bookshelves with books, memorabilia like a trophy my wife earned as a child in a piano competition with a cricket ball resting in it, novels by Peter Carey and Andre Gide, the spine of the graphic novel *Red Rosa* by Kate Evans, or a poster of a Palestinian refugee I collected when I was a student at Australian National University in 1980, at about the time I saw Vanessa Redgrave speaking in support of Palestine.

Conversely, who was that walking across the room behind a student? After the first week almost all students in my class of forty turned off their cameras, leaving me alone to address my desk monitor filled with black boxes featuring student names. As students asserted their power, this Zoomscape of student empowerment was a new challenge, one of discomfort in the realization that my claims to engagement as an educator were spurious. My confidence sagged. I had to acknowledge that the culture of the Zoomscape incorporated new types of oppression, to which the students responded with the tools at hand, the agency offered to them by the “screen off” setting. Freire’s ideas gained traction in the willful and just refusal of students to be observed in their intimate spaces through the lens. Student agency is one thing, the mediated conditions enabling them to assert their power in the virtual classroom was an entirely new pedagogical experience.

Student Athletes in the Mix

At the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, I taught thirty-five Division I Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) athletes about media and social media transitions, communication ethics, public policy, social and critical theory, and Artificial Intelligence. (To better get to conscientization for myself, the research about student athletes taught me that Women and Men’s ice hockey teams compete in the Hockey East competition, while sailing students compete in the Intercollegiate Sailing Association and ski in the Eastern

Intercollegiate Ski Association. It was disturbing to learn how little I knew about these structures of the student athlete experience).

Out of the ninety-two students in the three classes I taught, the student athletes deserve contextualizing because they exist as a near invisible, yet significant presence in the classroom. And in common with colleagues teaching undergraduates, I had no choice about their presence in my classes.

As the coronavirus hit and took hold in Massachusetts, everyone scattered homeward during the second week of March. For athletes, this shift translated into a life without teammates, practice, play, or partying, as new layers of activity were added to pandemic living. At a different register compared to regular students, student athletes experienced disruption beyond the everyday. Dramatic change came in the form of a negation of the regular context of the routines of practice-perform that define the lives of the ACC athlete. No longer absorbed in training for hours of every day, in a system in which courses have to be selected to fit in with training, athletes went home to participate in classes online without the interruptions of practice or travel to games. The dominant experience of practice-play for Division I student athletes gave way to the formal regularity of the curriculum-on-Zoom.

At the risk of stating the obvious, college athletics is highly regulated, which is to say, it is barely able to combine athletic excellence with academic outcomes for students. When training can officially begin and so on is determined by the ACC, the peak college sport regulator that sits above the colleges where the primary goal is education. Meanwhile, the public, university administrators, and non-academics see the end point of the practice hours in the performances on the field or the court. This contrasts with the classroom experience, where the daily athletic routines are like a game with an incomprehensible afterlife, a shadow play of moving texts. Who can say where the most valuable knowledge is acquired by student athletes? Certainly, recent research suggests that student-athletes identify with their athletic role far more than their academic role, causing a disruption to the dynamics of the classroom and resentment by student-athletes of their exploitation—an oppressive situation identified in recent court cases brought by college football players and their demand to be paid as players.³⁷ When BC's football team took to the field bearing the image of the American flag on their playing gear, the oppression of their utility as nationalistic symbols was obvious to anyone who was not blinded by the Stars and Stripes. For critics, teaching in a Division I college context is one of colliding cultures, where athletes are often ghosts in the classroom, their practices and travel absences orchestrated by their teams, with little control by faculty, their bodies regulated by the institution along with the national authorities that control athletics.

Meanwhile, classroom knowledge is structured in line with curricula expectations and its Jesuit, Catholic mission: "Boston College seeks to provide an education that will promote integration of the intellectual, social, religious, and affective dimensions. It urges students to reflect deeply on who they are and how they want to live their lives," notes the answer to "Why a Jesuit Education?"³⁸

Continuing later in a section about the “Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” BC says: “The Catholic intellectual tradition is not static traditionalism, but is constantly evolving, drawing from the riches of the past to give life to the future and, in its search for truth, engaged with every discipline and with all forms of belief and nonbelief.”³⁹

This context is clear, except for athletes, for whom formal academic knowledge collides with the informal knowledge they gain, especially the emotional intelligence learned playing games. Such informal human development is often relegated to the periphery in the era of science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) obsessions, even while the humanities and liberal arts are premised on the idea of the ineffable character of humanistic knowledge gained through dialogue. How should cultural studies and humanities academics entertain such conflicting ideologies of knowledge? One possibility is that contending knowledge contexts should be opened to debate and inclusion in education. This field is gradually entering pedagogical discourse through the discussion of computer games and “gamification” rather than sports, potentially upending oppressive systems of classroom environments, even while further extending new oppressions through the technological apparatus.⁴⁰

That observation hardly resolves the challenges. For example, on a normal class day, before Coronavirus, rowers arrived for a 9:00 a.m. class, barely dry from showering after three to four hours of training on the Charles River along with ergonomic exercises at the Community Rowing “shed” on Nonantum Road, Newton. As the regular students stumble in, sometimes barely awake, they might carry a cup of coffee, a ham and cheese bagel or a muffin, noisily unwrapping then eating their breakfast at a desk a foot away from me while I lecture on the intricacies of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rule-making during the Network Neutrality controversy. Meanwhile the rowers, along with football and basketball players, fresh from lifting weights and other before-class morning routines, are ready for a nap, struggling to concentrate. The colliding student identities manifest in physical ways and are never far from the surface. Nevertheless, almost all students are preoccupied with social media conversations that pop up during all hours of the day and night, including during class times. The additional layer for athletes is social media accounts linked to their teams, coaches, travel and game plans. This means that everyone is not always working synchronously: awake, asleep, online, present, absent, multitasking, shifting in real time.

One needs to be respectful of this multicontextual culture. As I have noted elsewhere, social media is central to student life and a feature of activist culture and politics in the pursuit of social justice.⁴¹ Making sense of it for students and young people is the right thing to do within a cultural studies worthy of its name. Managing it in the Zoomscape was another matter.

Indeed, when everyone left campus, the classroom context was deconstructed. No athletes trained with the team while everyone joined the universality of Zoom. For athletes, this move to isolation meant working with coaches through Zoom to keep fit, arranging skill activities while dreaming of what the future season might look like. Regular students continued their work.

Through Zoom conversations with student athletes I learned how Boston College baseball players experienced the sudden ending of classes on March 11, catching them unawares somewhere in the Carolinas. Busy with fifty-six scheduled games in the 2020 season, the baseball team and coaching staff packed up their equipment and headed back to Boston, where they immediately closed their dormitory rooms and bid farewell to the season and campus life, before traveling home to continue classes.

For seniors in all teams, this was the moment of deflation. "Regular" seniors were disappointed in the cancellation of commencement, graduation activities, and associated events marking the end of their college careers. Senior athletes experienced double the emotional distress as they readied for classes without training or games. Such generalized distress marked the abrupt end of college campus identity as it was replaced with admission to Zoomscape identity, leaving students and teachers alone to manage. Headlines from *Inside Higher Ed*, such as "Mental Health Needs Rise With Pandemic," identified anxiety disorders from numerous studies that could be read as symptoms of the oppression experienced using Zoom by Gen Z users.⁴² Such conditions provoked a shift to conversations on campus about mental health, even as the pinhole intimacy offered a kind of engagement that unlocked more knowledge, even while prompting new psychic difficulties.

Managing Diversity

In a Communication Department that includes courses like the ones I teach, Intercultural Communication, Social Media, Communication Ethics, New Media and Society, and Artificial Intelligence, student athletes can be referred to as athletes in class, and called on to engage in discussions about their teams, their experiences of success and failure on the fields, courts, and ice, and their observations about how new media, race, ethnicity, and unethical behavior inform their life experiences, teaching their classmates some of the lessons learned on and off the sports field. For example, after BC ice hockey players who were members of the US Women's Olympic and World Cup teams went on strike for pay, students from the team described their campaign in my classes. Their comments revealed what they had learned about women's rights, male athletic privilege, labor relations, and sport administrators. Added to a classroom discussion, their contributions as student-athletes were like diamonds in the rough soil of typical classroom pedagogy, opening vistas into other knowledge modalities.

Such learning opportunities are not inevitable. They have to be navigated, negotiated, and managed as a function of faculty-student interactions, against a tradition that insists that self-disclosure about individual experience (the "no politics or religion" mantra) is "off limits" in the exploration of culture. Taking advantage of the experiences of Division I student athletes in the classroom was welcomed by them, as they offered up their narratives without prompting. Before the pandemic, this alerted me to the way my own conscientization needed to mature in order to offer access to the uniqueness of student athlete knowledge, some of which was unique to my department with a relatively high number of student athletes. For example, a BC faculty colleague I met from a science

department had taught one athlete in fifteen years at BC. Across campus, it was impossible to generalize faculty's pedagogical experiences before the pandemic or in the Zoomscape.

As I noted above, Zoom deconstructed team identity and athletic codes of belonging. Sociologically, the team identity of athletes constitutes the pinnacle of their college experience. Online teaching allowed no such camaraderie, or the security of the team environment. For example, in normal circumstances on campus, football players move in groups of up to 10, enrolling in classes together, arriving in hustling bunches, as do groups of other team sport players.

This sketchy working ethnography of Gen Z athletes will have to suffice in the description of the changed classroom codes. It includes the way Black footballers behave, sitting along the back wall of classrooms, sometimes with their white teammates. Unfortunately, as recent research indicates, this positioning signifies a sense of student powerlessness.⁴³ With that knowledge, I used strategies such as asking questions of athletes as they tried to disappear into the back wall, where they hoped to be invisible, or was it to take refuge in an alien environment? Certainly, for the most part they expected to be identified as athletes, with little to contribute. In the coronavirus context I asked myself, what is the Zoomscape equivalent of hiding against the back wall for these athletes? While the answer is that not logging on or turning off the camera during a class session was one expression of power, a more positive prospect was that the pinhole intensity of the screen offered a kind of democratizing access to each individual, where they could be addressed personally. But Freire's conscientization prompts the question: is this mediated context merely a new and different form of oppression for the subset of student athletes, indeed for all students? And how does it oppress me, the instructor? The cultural formation of the Zoomscape had to be understood and critiqued in the search for conscientization and one way to comprehend the mediated formation was to look for empirical material about BC athletes. Once I had an improved understanding of the institution of BC and its athletes, perhaps it would be possible, I conjectured, to make an informed analysis of the ethnography I was attempting.

Doing the Numbers—Athletes, Athletic Scholarships

Of the 682 student athletes at BC in 2020, 337 were men and 345 women.⁴⁴ Many female athletes reminded me with strident complaints in class discussions and essays that women rarely featured prominently in media coverage of the college's programs. That's despite the 1972 legislation of Title IX: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."⁴⁵ The Federal Government's Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) regulates the "equality," even while women's sports reinforce a sense of second-class status for female athletes.

The EADA's data site is an eye-opener worthy of more detailed analysis than this article can deliver. Suffice to say, it is instructive to learn that BC spent \$21,048,627 in student aid in 2018–2019, not only for athletes. This was about a quarter of the total revenue of \$82,680,712 generated by all athletic teams for the year, with the identical amount appearing as expenditure. That is what the finance folk call impeccable accounting: \$82,680,712 zeroed out.⁴⁶

This may come as a surprise to alumni, who see athletics as the central part of the university experience to which they can make donations: they even built a football stadium named after themselves, "Alumni Stadium." It is a branding exercise that is reflected in the column inches of *The Boston Globe's* coverage of the intricacies of the teams, coaches, and star players that testifies to the way sport is privileged by the institution and its past students, a majority of whom reside after graduation in metropolitan Boston.

Clearly, there are multiple, interlinked contexts and codes at work. They include prioritizing then deprioritizing academic performance. Superior athletic performance is a given. Academics-athletics: mutually exclusive, yet co-existent in colliding contexts. In an effort to ameliorate the contradictions, support for athletes at a Division I college involves attention to academic performance, even while the sport narrative dominates. Just how the contradictions operate is as different as the ambitions and interests of each individual athlete. Prior to the Coronavirus, in a regular semester, a student athlete's context was defined by the BC Provost's Office and Student Athlete Academic Services (SAAS), where advisors assisted with homework, exam preparation, and projects.

Given the academic challenges facing student athletes, SAAS appears to be the best ethical effort by a Division I college to address the grind of practice-performance. Undoubtedly, BC Provost David Quigley and the Provost's Office has a commitment to an environment in which academic success is not merely a fantasy. The office recently ramped up support for athletes. According to an internal note on the Canvas learning platform site in 2019: "In order to better support BC student-athletes, individuals designated by SAAS have been allowed limited access to Canvas courses in which student-athletes are enrolled." Consequently, the names of athletic support staff appeared on class lists in Canvas the Learning Management System, where they observed the academic performance of the athletes they observed, as they produced and uploaded course work to Canvas.

While this kind of surveillance is hardly welcome in "the land of the free" outside the campus, it is part of the teaching environment for college athletes and their instructors. It adds an additional layer to the institutional commitment to get athletes over the graduation line by providing dedicated assistance from academic advisors, even as such surveillance undermines the sense that the classroom is an independent learning space. Online lurking is perhaps a more accurate term than surveillance, because like all forms of digital lurking, the lurker is invested in what happens and acts accordingly. What might be negatively and patronizing referred to as digital hand-holding involves face-to-face tutoring services in programs run out the Yawkey Center, alongside the Alumni Stadium.

For athletes who are weak academically, this service marks the difference between graduating with a degree, and a one- or two-semester flourish before dropping out. Furthermore, as a colleague reminded me when I told them I was writing this, academic advising is especially necessary for student athletes who are “recruited” to Division I colleges. Surprisingly, such recruitment applies to students so outstanding as high school athletes that their academic capacities are not the reason they go to college. Attentive readers may begin to feel the tightening of cognitive pressure at this point, as the dissonance between the formative culture of the Zoomscape coexists with the formation of the somewhat othered athlete.

Further research indicated that BC’s athletic program is measured in part by the Graduation Success Rate < <https://web3.ncaa.org/aprsearch/gsrsearch> > (GSR), a data set available at the NCAA Success Rate website.⁴⁷ It shows a BC Student Athlete GSR at 94 percent, although it also shows the 2012–2013 student athlete (first year students in 2011–2012) graduation rate as 77 percent, which is the same percentage of Black male athletes who graduated.⁴⁸ The confusing numbers are indicative of how student athletes performed by getting to graduation, over six years. Admittedly, my low comprehension about how the system operates is typical of the underappreciation of the entire edifice of student athletics. However, the GSR translates into metrics for the institution, which translate into competing “composite methodologies” for college rankings that influence student and athlete recruitment, federal funding options, and university status.⁴⁹ Confusion abounds, as conscientization mobilizes.

Another central aspect of Division I athletics is the 800-pound contextual gorilla in the stadium: scholarships. This opaque aspect of college life remains largely unspoken, publicly excluded from commentary and silent in the day-to-day activities of the classroom. It is also that fact, as Gerry Canavan and colleagues recently noted, that austerity has become a matter of concern for Jesuit Colleges that make little detailed information about their finances available.⁵⁰ Indeed, the operational code is that no one speaks about scholarships. This seems fair, as it would identify a classroom divided between students paying “full freight” for tuition, room, and board, and student athletes who may be paying little-to-nothing for their education, or those rare student athletes who engage in the “one and done” exercise – one year of college sport before moving on to professional teams.

College funding—as the student debt crisis in the US has indicated—is an expression of class. What we know about this at BC is unclear. The NCAA is more forthcoming. It noted that 6 percent of high school athletes receive college scholarships, while just 2 percent of college athletes become major professional players. Dissecting that percentage of students in the college mix does little to reveal what the educational system achieves.

At BC, an additional layer of funding is offered through an athletic endowment. The NCAA record for 2018–2019 identified the average athletic scholarship for BC men to be \$31,984, and for women athletes \$26,540, out of the cost of \$53,346 for annual tuition and fees.⁵¹ In contrast, 43 per cent of all undergraduates (non-athletes) received an average scholarship of \$38,307, indicating a pretty generous system for nearly half of BC’s undergraduate population.

Most of the time, the silence around athletic scholarships involves a pedagogical etiquette that does not include discussion of class. Such manners are foundational to the undergraduate classroom learning experience, unfortunately setting a precedent in which the most pressing issues of student life—money, privilege, and future indebtedness—are erased as learning texts.

This is not to say that finance issues are not discussed. One can address the complexities of contemporary college life in conversations with students about debt in the context of rising poverty, inequality, and post-graduation distress due to diminishing salaries and the fading American Dream of home ownership, and as a part of the changing cultural landscape of generalized liberal democratic, neoliberal precarity in the US. Furthermore, to add to the challenge, how can one explore the pathway of upward mobility through college education offered by sports scholarships in a room dominated by non-athletes? The answer is that while these usually untroubled minutiae were part of the “normal” college experience, their relevance evaporated during the 2020 Zoomscape timeframe, like the athletic programs generally. Then, the new cultural formation demanded coronavirus pedagogy, with its mediated, yet foggy intimacy that provoked conscientization.

Coronavirus Pedagogy

Whatever a smarmy software salesperson may claim, a platform is always only a configuration of algorithms targeting a general set of problems with a computer science solution. A platform in the Coronavirus education context is never capable of the intensity of the classroom engagement that defines the preferred ideals of liberal arts education, or better still the implicit critique of cultural studies. After all, a platform redefines human interactions in virtual ways. And yet, Zoom created the unexpected learning formation of coronavirus pedagogy, as a site for remaking teaching and learning.

Suddenly, in the Zoomscape, students were always available. In recording almost all my classes and uploading them to Canvas, the students could opt for asynchronous learning. And students continued to use the Canvas platform, and email, and in some cases the telephone to ask questions or seek answers to instructions about projects and final exams. Or they disappeared altogether from Zoom and other online interactions. Certainly, the flexibility of the Zoomscape required a new kind of pedagogical discipline, even as the absence of preparation or expertise in online teaching generated the questions that informed conscientization. How would it be possible to do justice to the process of “reflective action” in this new culture? The answer to that question must remain indeterminate under conditions in which the pinhole intimacy of Zoom demanded that attention be paid to the forces at work in the mediated classroom.

Open possibilities (with camera)

Coronavirus pedagogy was a virtual construct, drawing on preexisting systems of authority, remade by the virtual interactivity of the Zoomscape. It heralded a different orientation on the part of faculty, students, and administrators to how teaching happens, opening the potential for conscientization, as a radical formation. Despite that potentiality,

the coronavirus rupture to business-as-usual is open to debate, with contradictions that offer space for critical engagement based on reflection of our own practices, our students, and the institutions in which we are employed. The hope is that by prompting conscientization, this unsteady site of cultural formation can lead to activist efforts in research about how technology can construct better systems of knowledge for emancipation from oppression.

Versions of this experience will play out, perhaps for years, as every semester becomes more unlike every other semester, as recontextualizations expand or expire. Such evolutionary discontinuities will create cultures of undergraduate teaching that will be open to faster change given the unstable conditions that remain.

How will undergraduate teaching change? Will there be more opportunities for innovating emancipatory ideas around the needs and interests of students with online technologies? Will they look into a camera from wherever they are and in the spirit of conscientization, reflect then act on creating new pedagogies of their own? Will faculty extend the prospect for critical education by openly responding to the cultures that push and pull at them? Where, before the pandemic, there was an agglomeration of students in a physical classroom, conscientization can generate the digital enactment of knowledge in the pixilated detail of pinhole opticentricity. How will the new modality of learning translate into better, richer types of pedagogy? Who will be left out as the costs of providing the technology expand? Will instructors be exhausted in the wake? What implications are there for labor as education moves online? In other words, how will academic work be assessed? How will the concerns of poor and working class students be addressed? Can athletes and their knowledge be incorporated into conscientization? What cultural formations are emerging to impact the desire for justice in an oppressive system?


















To answer these questions is to return again to an acknowledgment of the way Gen Z students differ from their predecessors. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Adam Shatz described these students as the generation that

















don't even believe in the (American) dream. They've been ridiculed for their sense of entitlement by those who've enjoyed far more prosperity and, for all the mainstream criticism of identity politics, they understand far better than previous generations that racism is a system, rather than a matter of individual hatred, prejudice or 'ignorance'; they know that its embedded in institutions and that unless it's rooted out, American democracy will remain an unequal and unsafe space for black and brown people.⁵²

If this generation of undergraduates is to engage with new pedagogical traditions defined by a simple enough philosophical principle prompted by the mediated context of coronavirus pedagogy and conscientization, there is this: what I learned is that we all have a lot to learn. Of course, it was no surprise that, contrary to its corporate claims, Zoom did not bring happiness. That's the type of claim that matches corporate efforts to manipulate psychic wellbeing, even while expanding the oppression of users in the Zoomscape. Despite that, within the intimacy of the opticentric pinhole context, new opportunities emerged for pedagogical cultural praxis. Certainly, for critical academics with a















commitment to the formation of a culture of emancipatory politics in the tradition of Paulo Freire, the terrain of the Zoomscape offers a vista of contradictory contextual opportunities. The camera will be on.

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